

Interview with Prescott (Bud) Cummings

By Don Sparrow

Eastham, Massachusetts

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DS: This is an interview with Bud Cummings at his home off Nauset Road in Eastham as part of the Oral History Program for the Eastham Historical Society. The interviewer is Don Sparrow. The date is 27 October, 1988.

This is the third session we have had on rumrunning. This is to try to clear up some of the loose ends. One of the things that bothered me, when you went out beyond the 12-mile limit, the Coast Guard couldn't touch the foreign vessels. Could they intercept boats registered in the U. S.?

BC: Not until they got within the 12-mile limit again.

DS: O.K. I think the first time you told me you would be out there unloading and they would be watching you with searchlights and that was all. Then as soon as you took off, they could take off after you?

BC: That's right.'

DS: You said your boat would do 15 knots, I think. Fully loaded it would be considerably less than that?

BC: No. She'd do 36. We could out-run her easy. Destroyers would do 36. See, we had three 1600 horsepower engines, almost 2000 horsepower. Quite a boat. Wasn't heavy, because it was a 50-foot boat that was all open.

DS: Didn't have any steel plate on it for protection?

BC: No armament. No, only one boat that I knew that did that and that belonged to a man by the name of Max Fox, out of Providence, Rhode Island. He had a boat called the BLACK DUCK. You've probably heard of that. She had machine guns and supposedly she had some armament and poison gas. Nobody was sure about that. She could put up a smoke screen. She was quite a boat.

DS: I've read a lot about the BLACK DUCK, because that was the one that was shot up and three men were killed and a fourth was wounded.

BC: That's right.

DS: There's controversy over whether the Coast Guard deliberately shot her up.

BC: We all think they did. Because the first thing you're supposed to do is put a shell across the bow. Then they're supposed to disable the rudder. Only bullet holes on that boat were all through the cabin. So there isn't much question. And they were out to get them anyway.

DS: They converted the BLACK DUCK to a Coast Guard boat and used it to chase the rumrunners.

BC: That wasn't playing fair. We used to go in the North River at Scituate. He used to go up the North River too. There was a big place up the North River in Scituate. None of the big boats could come in after you. Shallow water, you know.

DS: You'd unload there and-- ?

BC: Yeah, and come out laughing.

DS: When you unloaded down on the Cape, you'd have a crew in advance on the shore? Fifteen to twenty people perhaps?

BC: For instance-- well, it depended on how much liquor you were going to bring in. I worked two thousand cases coming in, about ten to twelve men. The way it worked, the boat would come in, but she couldn't come into shore, too big for that. We'd send dories out, load the dories, and the dories would come in. These

men would usually form a chain, throw the cases from one to the other. If we had a heck of a big load, a thousand cases coming in, they would bring extra men down from Boston.

DS: How many cases could your boat take?

BC: My own boat? She'd take about four hundred.

DS: The bigger boats could take more?

BC: Oh, yeah.

DS: You'd have several boats come in at one spot?

BC: Well, not at the same time though. We had a 140-foot schooner and she could take a big load. 'Course she had to anchor even farther off shore.

DS: But they were still unloaded by dories?

BC: Yeah. I must have told you the one about the boat sinking a dory that kept taking just one more case on board.

DS: A normal case was twelve bottles, cased in burlap and then wrapped in straw. But there was something called a Burr Lock, which was six bottles, stacked three, two, one, like bowling pins. Did you ever hear of that?

BC: No, never happened to run into that one.

DS: Story I got was it was developed by a man named McCoy, who claimed to--

BC: We really had some beautiful liquors coming in. Canadian liquors, French liquors, all that stuff.

DS: Lennie Tarvers talked about five-gallon drums of Double Eagle. Did you ever encounter any of that?

BC: Only we didn't call it Double Eagle. There were five-gallon kegs and it was called Irley. It came straight from Scotland and it was unreduced liquor, was 190 proof. From that we'd take several from different distributors and blend. And then water them down to 100 or 90 or whatever. But when it came through that way it was the full 190 proof.

What they used for containers was cardboard containers, burlap stretched over them in such a way they had burlap on all six sides and at the end, where the burlap tied up, looked like two ears. Easy to handle that way, grab those ears.

We had one liquor that came from Canada, Double Eagle, and the Canadian quart, which is forty ounces. And each bottle came inside of a tin can, like an Italian olive oil can, all gold and red and white colors. They floated right off. Each can was full of air. That was marvelous.

Then we had Golden Wedding Scotch and a twenty-year-old pinch bottle that WAS twenty years old. They really had some really fine liquor then. Couldn't find them on the market today.

DS: Some cases I heard of, some ships operating off the shore would just use pure alcohol and flavoring and things and labeling machines and they would make up whatever you wanted. Scotch, rye, bourbon, whatever.

BC: They-- or we-- used to do that down on Columbus Avenue. Wide open, no law against it, various flavors for whatever you wanted. I remember Gordon's gin. You could buy a carton that said Gordon's Gin on it, with twelve bottles, and the labels looked exactly like Gordon's Gin labels, and a piece of lead for sealing, and if you were well known, you paid a few extra dollars and got the government seal on it. And then you just went home and made your own gin and put it in the bottles.

They would sell prepared flavorings, add a couple of drops or whatever. You bought Cologne spirits, which was a very high grade. Pure, straight. 190, 192, 193 proof. You could make a good gin with that. That's all gin is anyway. Most of the alcohol you bought wasn't that pure. 180 proof or so.

DS: Apparently there was quite a bit of hijacking. Sort of local entrepreneurial type of hijacking, none of the real rough stuff with guns and all that. You told me about the Guston boys, who got you involved. And then this Max Fox and the BLACK DUCK.

He wasn't adverse to a little hijacking. He'd do anything. Was he killed when the BLACK DUCK was shot up?

BC: No, he was too smart for that. He didn't go out. He owned it and stayed ashore. They were a bad crowd.

DS: The man you worked for was strictly a businessman. He didn't go for that rough stuff and just was a good businessman.

BC: The most he would have was a monkey wrench. We didn't shoot anybody in his crowd. Well, we did have guards with guns, but they knew what they were doing.

DS: Eric Nickerson had a lot of stories. I guess he was younger. He said they used bottles of whiskey as articles of trade. He could fill up his car with gasoline and buy two tickets to a high school dance for a bottle of champagne. He told me that once he was coming home from school and his mother yelled out the door, "Don't stop! Get down to South Sunken Meadow Beach. There's a load of booze!" He bought his first car, paid for his Washington trip with the receipts of that.

BC: I don't doubt it. You didn't have to go around peddling it. You get home and pretty soon there'd be a knock at the door, someone would come, a customer. Most of the Cape Codders were in on it or wished they were, you know. And it was a very popular thing. If you weren't a rum-runner, you were nobody.

DS: Profitable.

BC: Oh, sure. There was no cash money around then. This came in like a godsend. Most of the town officials and the police, even the State Police, pretty much knew about it or were in on it, oh, yeah. They just looked and "why, what have we here?" and they went to work on it too. Everyone else was, they might as well too. It was a very unpopular law. They put it through while the fellows were overseas. Everybody was madder than hell about it.

Our boat, the schooner, was a beauty. Had black sails, just like a pirate boat. Two masts. Can't remember her name. Boats had numbers. Every boat had to have a number. That was one reason the Coast Guard could board you, because you didn't have a number.

DS: When you left Rum Row, left the destroyer behind you, you still had to worry about the picket and patrol boats in the Bay. But you could outrun them?

BC: Because the destroyer that is out after us is in contact with the shore patrol all the time, and what you are doing all the time is outfoxing them. Trying to get in somewhere and fool them, that's all there was to it. Most times you could because you were so fast.

DS: I think Lennie told me there were only three picket boats available in Cape Cod. Three picket boats isn't enough to patrol the whole area.

BC: He'd know things like that. I couldn't know how many they had.

DS: You were never caught?

BC: We had a load shot off the deck one time. That was the three-stacker, see. Wasn't supposed to shoot until we were within the 12-mile limit, but she was about twenty miles off. I was standing side of the guy steering. One pounder, I think. It went between us. Whole deck blew right off. Neither he or I could hear well for a week or ten days afterward. Booze all over the place. Just a few minutes more, we got to the North River and he couldn't follow us any more. There wasn't a straight shot on the river. It twists, you know.

DS: There must have been an odor of alcohol-- booze-- on these boats all the time.

BC: There was no question in anyone's mind who was a rumrunner or who wasn't, you know. Because what were you doing in Rock Harbor with a boat with two thousand crossbars sitting there? No question who was and who wasn't. I told you about the NOMORE, didn't I?

DS: Yes. I understand that a few quahoggers did go out and pick up a few cases. Wasn't only the high-speed boats.

BC: They did it on occasion. Not very often. They would have got caught. Everything seemed about all right, they'd go out and get a few cases.

DS: The picket boats would intercept them?

BC: Yeah. Easily.

DS: Someone told me they would put all the cases on the gunwales in series, tied together in series. If they were going to be caught, they'd kick over the last and the rest would go too.

BC: Don't remember that, because I wasn't on that. Occasionally liquor was landed on the ocean side. Not too often. Too iffy. On account of weather. A number of times there would be anonymous phone calls to the Coast Guard. They would dutifully go out there and it would come in on the west shore.

DS: I gather most of the Coast Guard were tolerant, if not actively involved.

BC: I don't think any ever did it for money. If you want to drop a few cases off tomorrow, fine. Like the cases off Long

Nook. By the time the load got to Provincetown, very few cases.

DS: Like the time they came upon a load of cases and had to bring it to the station in Eastham. Fifteen hundred cases. Called up Boston and they said they couldn't take it for a month, they were loaded. When they finally came down, there were four hundred cases to go to the government warehouse.

BC: That was when Captain Daniels was on. He got away with murder, that guy did.

DS: He had a couple of daughters. They were at our schoolhouse reunion last summer. I should talk to them.

BC: He was a real character. He loved to go down to dance on Saturday nights. He'd put one guy on duty at the station and the whole gang would go down, leave the station barren. Dance at Southward Inn or Ship Ahoy [now Land Ho!]. Pierson woman owned it. I always felt kindly toward them. I had a pet pig and they'd let me bring my pig in during the day. We'd sit in the booth and they'd give the pig a bowl of beer and me a glass of beer.

DS: She was a pretty interesting gal. She wrote that book, ROUGHLY SPEAKING. Was very popular.

BC: One afternoon, hell of a racket. He [her husband] rode his

horse right into the restaurant.

DS: You said so much of rumrunning was waiting?

BC: We actually brought in 40,000 cases of booze all told. We had a place in Dennis. Went to work at eight p.m. This was business, you know. Then you'd sit and play cards and you'd get a telephone call, maybe eleven, twelve p.m., saying whether it was coming in or whether it wasn't coming in. It would go on three or sometimes four nights in a row. The boat didn't come in for one reason or another.

DS: You were getting paid?

BC: No, you weren't getting paid that way. You were paid every time a boat came in. Each person who worked on it was paid five dollars per case, so it didn't make any difference how many men worked. Each got paid five dollars a case. On top of that, I would get paid for driving the truck to where we got the liquor hid, until an A&P truck picks it up. No order came in, you didn't get paid.

DS: Chancey thing.

BC: We used to play cards for fairly high stakes for those days. \$1.00 blackjack. Got paid well enough when the stuff came in. Oh yes, when you consider down here you made twelve dollars a

week, you had a job in those days. It was fun. I would have gone down there whether we had a job or not. High pay, seven hundred dollars a week.

DS: Did you ever know Manny Zorra?

BC: Yes. Knew him well. He was eighteen, twenty years old before he ever slept in a house. Knew the waters, good sailor, known as the Sea Fox. When we were in Portugal, we decided to look him up. Went to this town he was supposed to be in. Asked old men in the town square coffee shop. One man said he was living in a town nearby. One man took us. But never did find him. Liked him. Always was top fisherman out of Provincetown. Was a fisherman after rumrunning. Awfully nice, sweet guy. We'd go out on his boat, Millie and me, when they had the Blessing of the Fleet.

DS: Colonel Korn?

BC: Didn't know him.

DS: Bud added one more story after the tape was turned off. He told me that although his boat was never caught by the Coast Guard, it did catch fire. A Coast Guard boat, the KICKAPOO, rescued him.

BC: Too bad it isn't ten years ago. There'd be more of the guys around to talk to.